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SUBJECT: ROOTS OF SAINT JOSEPH'S FOUNDING ORDER TRACED

(First in a series of two articles)

RENSSELAER, Ind. -- It has frequently been stated that Saint Joseph's College here was founded in 1889 by the Society of the Precious Blood at the behest of Joseph Dwenger, Catholic bishop of this area at that time.

Where did this Society come from? What was it like? What were its roots?

These are difficult questions to answer, even for younger members in the Society itself, because it is most difficult to reconstruct the times during which the Society was founded and even the time when the college itself was established.

The Society of the Precious Blood had its beginnings in the aftermath of the French Revolution, a revolution which had shaken all of Europe in its political, social, and religious foundations. It was in 1815 near Rome that St. Gaspar del Bufalo, a diocesan priest, founded the Society. Because conditions in the Papal States had become religiously so demoralized, he organized a loose union of priests with the common purpose of supporting one another in giving missions (what we might today call religious revivals or renewals) in and around Rome to reform the Catholic clergy and laity.

He employed the theme Precious Blood (the blood Christ shed for our redemption) to underscore the intense love God has for his people, and

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by focusing on this, he hoped to reverse in the hearts of people the secularism and religious indifference that had set in. St. Gaspar used the Precious Blood not only as the title for his religious society, but he had his priests wear the crucifix and chain (as is seen in old pictures of Father Augustine Seifert, the college's first president) as an external mark and reminder. "Lay brothers" were also invited to join the Society, not as priests or missionaries, but as servants.

In 1838 this Society was extended into the German-speaking areas of Europe when a German-speaking Swiss priest, Father Francis Brunner, joined the Society of the Precious Blood. From our American perspective, Father Brunner ought to be seen as a second founder of the Society, since his followers, over whom his strong personality and will dominated, took on a form different from that in Italy.

Like Gaspar, Brunner had also witnessed the demoralization of Catholicism in the wake of the French Revolution, and because of the hostility of civil authorities and only half-hearted approval from church superiors, he started a self-sustaining "monastery" in an abandoned castle in Switzerland called Loewenberg. His mother, a woman of some means, had already organized there a group of poor women which would later on become the Sisters of the Precious Blood, and with their support through work, begging, etc., Father Brunner was able to invite poor but willing young men whom he formed into priests and lay brothers.

This German branch of the Society seemed to have little future until he was invited by Bishop John Purcell of Cincinnati to come to America to help organize the recently-settled German immigrants, es-

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pecially in rural districts, into parishes. This New World apostolate proved to be altogether different from the kind of work done in Europe, namely, giving missions and retreats. To make a long story short, Father Brunner transferred all his priests, brothers, and sisters to Ohio and built a "monastery" for them in the vicinity of Norwalk.

Between his arrival at the end of 1843 and his death in 1859, Father Brunner succeeded in establishing no fewer than ten such monasteries, which were located in strategic positions so as to serve as many parishes as possible. He had started in 1844 with 15 male members of the Society and about twice that many sisters. But in America, conditions were more favorable than in Europe. He was welcomed by the immigrants and by the bishops, and best of all he had no interference from the government. By the time of his death he had gathered 25 priests, around 50 brothers, and over 200 sisters, nearly all of them immigrants from German-speaking territories in Europe.

The monastic character of Brunner's Society, so different from that of the Italian, worked quite well, for it afforded the Society an economic basis for survival. There was no state support or support from benefices as in Europe, and the immigrants at first were themselves too poor to contribute very much. Each of the ten monasteries eventually acquired an average of 200 acres of farmland for its support.

(Next: The society after Father Brunner's death)